

April 7th 2013: John The Baptist #6: "The Elijah Who Was To Come" : Malachi 4:1-6 and Matthew 11:1-15

There is something about the life of John the Baptist that has always fascinated me, and that is his connection with the OT prophet Elijah.

Now there are many stories about the prophet Elijah which you will find from chapter 17 of First Kings up to chapter 2 of Second Kings, and he is portrayed as a man of great faith in God and action for God. He performed more miracles than any other person in the Old Testament with the exception of Elisha. He is remembered as the man fed by ravens and as the prophet who challenged 450 prophets of Baal to a fiery duel on Mount Carmel.

But of all the things that make Elijah stand out above all but two others, is the fact that Elijah never died. 2 Kings 2:11 tells us:

¹¹ As they were walking along and talking together, suddenly a chariot of fire and horses of fire appeared and separated the two of them, and Elijah went up to heaven in a whirlwind.

Very interesting. And even more so when you turn to a prophetic book written 400 years after Elijah and 450 years before the birth of Christ. A book that talks about Judgment, the end times and the coming of the Messiah. That book is Malachi, the final book in the Old Testament, and the following words are the last words recorded before the NT begins.

Malachi 4:1-6

4 "Surely the day is coming; it will burn like a furnace. All the arrogant and every evildoer will be stubble, and the day that is coming will set them on fire," says the LORD Almighty. "Not a root or a branch will be left to them. ² But for you who revere my name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its rays. And you will go out and frolic like well-fed calves. ³ Then you will trample on the wicked; they will be ashes under the soles of your feet on the day when I act," says the LORD Almighty.

⁴ "Remember the law of my servant Moses, the decrees and laws I gave him at Horeb for all Israel.

⁵ "See, I will send the prophet Elijah to you before that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes. ⁶ He will turn the hearts of the parents to their children, and the hearts of the children to their parents; or else I will come and strike the land with total destruction."

Now all this is incredible stuff. It was hard for the people who lived then to understand. Even harder for the people in Jesus' day, but perhaps a little easier for us.

If we look at it in as simple a way as possible there are three obvious sections

The first or red section is about a great and terrible judgment. There is no doubt about that. It uses the language form of that day which often was to overstate the punishment and the joy. To paint a word picture that would fire the imagination.

However within it we see two groups. The arrogant and the evil doer are the group upon which the judgment falls. But for the other group who revere the name of Almighty God, the outcome is not defeat but victory, because of the rising of the sun of righteousness—one of the titles that the Jews used for the coming Messiah.

So immediately we are faced with the question, how do you become part of the group that reveres God's name, and to whom the sun of righteousness comes?

Well the answer to that seems to be found in the blue section. People will have to get back to being serious about following the laws of Moses.

Which then of course leads on the next question which is, but how can that happen? And the answer seems to be there in the third, or green section.

God will send Elijah back, who of course never died, to preach effectively and turn the people back to the law before the Messiah and the judgment comes.

Now fast forward with me to the time of John the Baptist and imagine that you are a scribe or Pharisee.

The last 400 years have been a terrible time for your nation. No prophet and no voice from God. Everything that could have gone wrong went wrong, and it seems to be getting worst. The idol worshipping Romans are now in control of God's land including Jerusalem, and everywhere fanatical Jewish zealots are pushing the Nation to war against Rome. A war that they cannot win. It would be total annihilation. Just like the judgment Malachi predicts.

So what are you going to do? As a Scribe or Pharisee you are a teacher and upholder of the law of Moses, you are passionate about being a Jew, and you know Malachi's prophecy by heart.

Well first, you must make sure that the law of Moses is so well defined and interpreted that there is just no chance of getting it wrong. You just can't afford for that to happen. Then you must convince your fellow Jews to keep it perfectly.

So you take every rule, regulation and direction of that law and you set it out to the nth degree, and then so enforce it that no Jew would dare disregard it.

Second, you would keep a sharp look out for the coming of Elijah for you know that not only will he be the key person sent by God to bring the population back to solid Jewish thinking, but once he arrives it means that the Messiah is not far behind.

So how will you recognize him? By the way he dresses. 2 Kings 1:8 describes him as a man who:-

"He had a garment of hair and had a leather belt around his waist."

By the way he preaches: He will call the nation to repentance because the Messiah is coming, and he will turn the hearts of the parents to the children and vice-versa.

But especially you would know it was him **because of the way he arrives**. For the Jews believed that Elijah would come back in the same way that he went. In a fiery chariot.

Then the rumours start. About a child born to an old priest and his wife some 30 years before. How at that time in some sort of prophetic utterance about the boy, the priest had declared: (Luke 1:17)

And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.

You recall Malachi 4:5-6

⁵ "See, I will send the prophet Elijah to you before that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes. ⁶ He will turn the hearts of the parents to their children, and the hearts of the children to their parents; or else I will come and strike the land with total destruction."

You start to put two and two together.

Then you hear about the way this boy, now become a man, dresses.(Mark 1:6)

⁶ John wore clothing made of camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey.

And also that he preaches like a Prophet of old, majors on repentance, and proclaims that he is the voice in the desert declaring the coming of the Messiah.

So you send a group of others-lesser lights-to check him out, because you have huge doubts in your mind already, for Elijah was due to arrive, as far as the scholars were concerned, in a chariot of fire directly from heaven.

So we read in John 1:19-21

***¹⁹ Now this was John's testimony when the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem sent priests and Levites to ask him who he was.
²⁰ He did not fail to confess, but confessed freely, "I am not the Messiah."
²¹ They asked him, "Then who are you? Are you Elijah?"
He said, "I am not."***

The lesser lights come back and report to you and the others in Jerusalem and it confirms your thinking. This guy doesn't even believe himself to be Elijah, so there's no way this Jesus that he points to as the Messiah, can be anything other than an imposter. Anyhow, when the real Elijah comes he will have celestial transportation.

But there's a real problem in your thinking. You are so convinced that when Elijah comes he will come ready made, in a chariot of fire, raring to continue the task he started 850 years before, that you haven't left any room for God to act differently.

John knew that they were asking whether he was that flesh and bone Elijah and he answered correctly that he wasn't. He would have known from what his father had been told that "he would go in the spirit and power of Elijah" which of course he did and Jesus recognized that fact and said so in Matthew 11:13-15. (And I'm using Pettersen's paraphrase because it makes it all clear.)

But if you read the books of the Prophets and God's Law closely, you will see them culminate in John, teaming up with him in preparing the way for the Messiah of the kingdom. Looked at in this way, John is the 'Elijah' you've all been expecting to arrive and introduce the Messiah.

¹⁵ "Are you listening to me? Really listening?"

This problem in their thinking was not restricted to the Pharisees either. Even Jesus' close disciples, after the transfiguration when they had seen Moses and Elijah standing on that mountain with Jesus, came to Him and asked In Matthew 17:10-13

¹⁰ The disciples asked him, "Why then do the teachers of the law say that Elijah must come first?"

¹¹ Jesus replied, "To be sure, Elijah comes and will restore all things. ¹² But I tell you, Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize him, but have done to him everything they wished. In the same way the Son of Man is going to suffer at

their hands.”¹³ Then the disciples understood that he was talking to them about John the Baptist.

The really sad thing was that this belief that Elijah had to come in a certain way really blinded many Jews at that time to the fact that Jesus was the Messiah. They saw His works and His miracles yet because they believed that the Elijah who had to come first would come back in a chariot of fire, they just didn't really take John the Baptist or Jesus seriously. They didn't listen to God and they missed out on knowing Jesus as their Messiah.

And even today in Jewish homes when the Passover is eaten, a spare place is always set at the table for Elijah.....just in case he turns up to herald the coming of Messiah.

All this just goes to show how easy it is for human assumptions and interpretations to get in the way of Divine truths. Many of those Pharisees were sincerely wrong and consequently they stopped listening to God. Really listening to His Son.

One day soon Jesus will return in glory and in power. When He does there will again be those who will miss out on His kingdom because they are trusting in their own little schemes and assumptions about what must first take place, rather than simply trusting in His promises and living each day as though that day would be the day of His coming.

There were many who missed the first coming of the Christ because they just were not prepared to really listen to God the Son and to trust their lives into His hands. This time when He comes there will be no second chance. So make sure that you know that you are ready for His coming.

